

## **Independent Review Panel – Financial Support for Members**

IRP -71

### **Welsh Conservative Group's submission to the Independent Review Panel**

The Welsh Conservative Group is grateful for the opportunity provided by the Independent Review Panel to make a submission on the current system of Allowances.

The following recommendations carry the support of all members of the Group.

We believe that the system of Allowances works fairly well but that there is room for greater transparency and for alignment with business practice which would make the system more evidence based and remove the negative aspects which generate such heat both internally and externally to the Assembly.

#### **Additional Costs Allowance**

Westminster £23,083/National Assembly for Wales £12,500 for 2007/2008)

This Allowance reimburses Members for expenses necessarily incurred in staying overnight from their main home for the purpose of performing their duty as an Assembly Member. This parallels similar provisions at Westminster.

**Recommendation 1: This should be renamed Personal Accommodation Expenditure in order to disabuse the perception that it is allocated regardless of expenditure.**

For Members living some distance from the National Assembly a base in Cardiff is desirable. Some Members have traditionally stayed overnight in hotels in Cardiff others rent and others have purchased. Those who have purchased have often used some of their own capital and therefore borrowed a lesser sum of money which would involve a lower repayment sum being necessary.

In relation to the distance element we believe that the principle should be the distance from the National Assembly by the most appropriate road (this would generally be the shortest) to the main home. The issue of what distance is fair is clearly a debatable one and that calculation must also consider the hours that are worked in the evening by Members attending political and lobby briefings, cross party groups and sponsoring events.

**Recommendation 2: A determination is made as to an appropriate travel to home time for Members given the constraints of the hours worked.**

If a new Assembly Member lives sufficiently far away to warrant the full allowance they should have the option of using it to pay for hotels or to rent or purchase a second home. The annual allowance should be sufficient to cover either the cost of 3 or 4 nights a week in a Cardiff hotel or to rent a one or two bedroom property in the Cardiff Bay area. The annual allowance should be sufficient to cover the Rent (or a comparable amount of interest only payment), Rates, Insurance, TV licence and Utility bills and should be reviewed annually against the local market conditions.

If a Member decides to rent or purchase a property they should receive a standard one off relocation allowance to enable them to furnish their home. This is in line with private sector policy, does away with the yearly examination of the minutia of personal expenditure, does away with the perception of being endlessly funded by the taxpayer for household goods, mitigates the subsequent costs to the Commission and enables anyone irrespective of their financial situation to become an Assembly Member without it having a detrimental effect on their first home and their families.

**Recommendation 3: The Independent review Panel agrees an initial New Member relocation sum which is separate and payable on receipts for the furnishing of a Cardiff Home.**

**Recommendation 4: The Independent review Panel fixes a yearly sum that will cover the costs of 4 nights stay in a central Cardiff hotel or a second home with the attendant costs we have previously identified.**

We recognise that there is a cost to Members for subsistence if staying in a hotel however we do not believe that Members who own/rent a second home in Cardiff should claim for subsistence.

Contrariwise there is no subsistence allowed if a Member is staying away for less than 24 hours on committee business. Again an anomaly.

Recommendation 5: That there is no subsistence paid unless a Member is staying in a hotel irrespective of the length of their stay.

**Mileage Allowance**

(40p for the first 10,000 miles then 25p after)

Members who receive the Full Additional Allowance should also receive 40p per mile for more than the first 10,000 miles as many of them will get to that extremely early in the year. The amount should also be reviewed annually as fuel prices fluctuate so markedly.

**Recommendation 5: The amount of miles at the top end of the scale should be reviewed. The scale should be reviewed annually.**

## **Office Costs Allowance**

(£15,000)

The Office Costs Allowance is intended to reimburse Assembly Members for the cost of maintaining constituency office or offices, and, in addition, such matters as the advertising of surgeries, constituency telephone/email contacts, etc.

The costs of maintaining an office in the constituency is rising due to a number of factors. The Welsh Assembly is directly responsible for areas such as health, housing, schools, transport and the economy. All areas which have a direct impact upon people's day to day lives and this reflects in the high caseload carried by most Members.

Additionally we believe that irrespective of political affiliation the Assembly Members have a part to play in re-engaging the electorate with the political process. We can do that by going the further mile in the performance of our tasks. This will require additional resources and the ability to deploy the resources we have as we see fit. Therefore there may be a requirement to have a member of staff who physically visits every planning site or it maybe appropriate for the Cardiff based support staff to be in the constituency on a more regular basis. This is up to each member. However the existing method of paying for 18 journeys a year for Cardiff to Constituency travel or for limiting the amount of mileage that can be undertaken by a member of the support team constrains the true ability to manage the service each Member provides to their constituency according to that constituency's needs. It would also be appropriate for the Office Costs Allowance to cover lessons in Welsh for non Welsh speakers.

**Recommendation 6: That the Commission does away with set numbers of journeys and maximum spends on mileage and accepts that staff will travel on constituency business as and when required and all claims will be supported by a claim form.**

A new Assembly Member will have a certain amount of one off costs in setting up an office. At present those one off charges have to be found from the annual allowance.

**Recommendation 7: That there is a one off constituency office set up fund. Based on a reasonable assumption by the Commission of the items that maybe incurred. All expenditure to be supported by a receipt.**

At present there is a significant difference between the sums Westminster are allowed for a constituency office and the sums that the Assembly Members are allowed. This is obviously nonsense as the costs will be the same

**Recommendation 8: That there is parity between the Assembly and Westminster on the costs allowed for constituency work and office.**

### **Employment of Associated Parties**

We believe that this is appropriate provided it is transparent. There is a lot of “unpaid” support afforded to Assembly members by spouses/partners and members of their families to support their work and to enable evening work etc Many Assembly Members do employ partners as constituency support staff or Personal Assistants and provided this is open and there is genuine work being performed it is convenient and allows members certain reassurances such as diary management, trust and out of hours commitment.

### **Travel by Members to Parliaments and European Union Institutions**

The current rule is that one visit per Member to a national or devolved institution in a member state as well as up to three visits to European Union institutions in Brussels.

**Recommendation 9: Some greater flexibility here may be reasonable to include (as an alternative to a visit to a member state) a visit to a candidate country or possibly to a country that belongs to the Council of Europe. This would reflect the Westminster provision.**

### **Allowances for Support Staff**

A separate submission is being made in relation to the benefits and terms of conditions of support staff. The Welsh Conservative Group endorses and supports the recommendations made by the Welsh Conservative Support Staff. We would wish to add the following riders:

There is very little room for Members to determine the pay scales of their own staff and to reward for outstanding work and long service unless via a one off bonus.

There is little room for Members to determine how many staff they employ within their overall allowance.

We are concerned about the severance package available to staff if a Member is not reflected

### **General Points**

We believe that there should be a crèche provided within the National Assembly. It has been mooted on many an occasion but has never gone further. Many private and public sector employers now provide crèche facilities. We also note the drain on resources for Members with regard to evening child care in the performance of their duties.

We also note that the National Assembly is the only representative body in the United Kingdom that does not have a gym for use but all members of staff

**Recommendation 10: That the Independent review Panel considers these general points when making their decision and allows for members to claim for out of hours childcare, for there to be a crèche for all members of staff within the Assembly to use and that there should be a gym with access for all.**

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